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# HORSESHOE NAILS TO SQUEEZE BOTTLES

*A New Look at  
Stonington, Connecticut*

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# Horseshoe Nails

## to

# Squeeze Bottles<sup>\*</sup>

OUTSIDE the arid realm of statistics, no such people as Mr. and Mrs. Average American exist, and there is, of course, no such place as the typical Connecticut town. And yet our towns do share common characteristics that distinguish them, say, from towns in Texas or Indiana.

The Connecticut type is well known and easily recognized. You can still identify it in many small towns out in northern Ohio which, when it was Connecticut's Western Reserve, was largely settled by people from this State. Modern super-highways and new shopping centers are revising our geography radically, but the pattern of the high-spired Wren church on the village green surrounded by four-square, center-

chimneyed, white houses persists in our older, smaller communities.

Beneath exterior appearances, however, the similarity of our Connecticut towns becomes intense, individualistic variety. In this Land of Steady Habits, the American way of life goes by many and various paths to school and church, to office or factory or farmland.

Every Open House Days tourist quickly learns that every Connecticut community proudly displays the "first" of this, the "oldest" of that, the "finest example" of something else. The example of local pride may be a covered bridge or a one-room schoolhouse, a yawning stone fireplace or a silver teaspoon; but always it is rare, even unique, and very precious. Our technique is more subdued than the proverbially blatant boasting of the Texan, but cause and effect are the same. Local pride is

<sup>\*</sup>Address at the Stonington Open House Day of the Antiquarian & Landmarks Society of Connecticut, May 19, 1956.



paradoxically one of the strongest of many bonds binding these United States into one nation.

### *The Typical Town History*

We people of Connecticut are historically minded — further evidence of our local pride — and there is hardly a tiny town that does not have its own history. These works may be stout tomes like Orcutt's *Torrington*, Davis' *Wallingford*, or Frances Caulkins' twin volumes on *Norwich* and *New London* or they may be but a slender paper-bound pamphlet. But again, in all their variety, they have one common characteristic. They greatly neglect the economic past of the community. You get from them only the foggiest notion of how our forefathers made a living.

Usually our town histories are

written either by an amiable Congregational minister or an estimable Judge of Probate, worthy gentlemen both, but quite ignorant of the techniques of historical research or the precepts of scholarship and indifferent to local "business interests." Accordingly, they typically devote about two-thirds of their pages to genealogy and, according to the center of their personal interest, about a quarter to town or church affairs. That leaves precious little space in which to record all the agricultural, commercial, industrial, and financial activities; and they commonly use up half of this to list the successive officers and directors of the town's First National Bank!

We all know the important part played by our town meeting in the working and thinking of democracy.

*"Stonington is famous in the annals of His Majesty's Navy" so the British Ambassador wrote at the time of the town's Tricentennial Celebration in 1949, "as the only seaport in America twice to repulse its fullscale attacks." Cannon Square was the site of the battery that drove off the attacking fleet in 1814. The unique flag (16 stars and 16 stripes) flown at this battle hangs in the Old Stone Bank Building, owned by the Stonington Historical Society, which houses a branch of the Hartford National Bank and Trust Company.*





We recognize a few such names as Eli Whitney and Seth Thomas and are vaguely aware of the Yankee tinkerer and the Yankee peddler. Few of us realize what Connecticut business enterprise in all its ramifications from chicken farming to investment banking has meant in the lives of our own ancestors and in the development of the American Economy. It is a fascinating story and one that has exceptional significance today.

### *Early Stonington*

Because the specific example is much more vivid than the general statement it is more interesting and understandable. Therefore, with some reservations about "the typical Connecticut town," the story of how the people in my own home town, Stonington, have made a living during the past three centuries makes a good, brief introduction to this subject.

We Stoningtonians like to think that our history is exceptionally colorful. At the time of our Tricentennial in August 1949, the British Ambassador told us our town is famous in the annals of His Majesty's Navy, famous as the only town in North America that twice repelled its full-scale attack. He chided us for cherishing on the top of several granite hitching posts that still adorn our principal street, sundry cannon balls left in our midst during the bombardment of the War of 1812. Then he slyly added, "But I am sure that you have evened the score, for I learn from the official statistics of imports into Great Britain that later you shipped us 1,567,912 wooden nutmegs."

It was a Stonington-built sloop, the *Hero*, 48-feet on the waterline, commanded by 22-year-old Capt. Nat Palmer, with a crew of six Stonington lads, all in their teens, that discovered the Antarctic Continent. On Stonington Point the first lighthouse in Connecticut was built by

the Federal Government, and at Stonington the first Pekin ducks arrived in this country from China. Incidentally, their importer made quite a neat thing out of his monopoly, selling eggs for hatching at the then-fabulous price of \$25 a dozen.

In all this you will recognize the Texas technique, but surely our "famous firsts" can be matched by many a Connecticut town. Be that as it may, Stonington certainly provides a typical Connecticut environment. The waves dash high on our rock-bound coast: too high sometimes. Our weather is proverbially fickle — "if you don't like it, stick around for a couple of hours, it will change." Our soil is thin and full of stones. We live literally on the dump heap of the last Ice Age. There is nothing soft and lush about our countryside. You cannot pick a living off the trees in Stonington: you must, as we say, scabble for it. And yet for three centuries we have managed in a tough environment to make a pretty good living. And not by selling wooden nutmegs!

### *The Pequot Invasion*

Here was the home of the Pequots, a brave and intelligent, but cruel and arrogant tribe which a hundred years before the coming of the English had invaded Connecticut from their homeland in the Hudson River Valley. Like a hurricane devastating a cornfield, they fell upon the rather spiritless Connecticut River Indians: their conquest was swift and bloody.

This foreshore of Connecticut, which the Pequots grabbed for themselves, was prime Indian country; a rugged, hilly, forested land abounding in game. Its many little streams, teemed with fish and the generous shoreline was stuffed with clams and oysters. From these Happy Hunting Grounds the Pequots were ruthlessly expelled by the whitemen.

But their Happy Hunting Grounds was not a country well suited to sup-

port an English community based on agriculture which was the foundation of the American economy throughout the colonial period. Eagerly seeking corn to save the earliest Massachusetts settlers from starvation, the first white men came as traders. They were welcome, for their steel knives and axes, their linen shirts and woolen blankets, to say nothing of firearms, meant to the natives fabulous comfort and security. Beaver and deerskins were important items in the barter that Thomas Stanton, one of our settlers, carried on at his trading post. Nevertheless, for a century corn and wheat remained the great commercial staples of Stonington.

ships that brought these first immigrants had no room for animals, so the demand for them was insistent and prices were high.

A Stonington pioneer, Thomas Miner, has left a diary in which he records many trips overland driving livestock to this lucrative market. It was a troublesome and risky journey. Once, in the dead of night, a sudden thunderstorm stampeded his hogs, and though he stumbled through the thickets till the middle of the next day, he could round up only half of his herd. Another time, a rascally innkeeper took a fancy to a young stallion and, backed by his Indian servant, threatened to cudgel Miner



*The "wolf stone" gravestones of Stonington's earliest settlers in the old burying ground at the head of Wequetequock Cove. The flat stone in the center marks the grave of the Rev. James Noyes one of the Congregational ministers who gave his library to found Yale. The rough stone just to the right is the oldest grave, that of the pioneer Walter Palmer.*

Our first settlers took up land along the coves. Coarse marsh grass flourished here, good forage for their cattle. It was their first quick asset, for their initial cash crop was livestock — horses and cows, sheep and pigs — sold to the newcomers thronging into New England during the Great Puritan Exodus. The little

soundly if he did not settle for his night's lodging by giving him the horse.

Such hazards made it safer and easier, and it also took less time, to huddle the animals into a small shallop and sail around Cape Cod to the towns that fringed the coast to Cape Ann. As more land was brought



under cultivation, corn and wheat, dried peas and beans, were added to the cargoes of livestock. The ships brought back hoes and axes, guns and powder, all sorts of manufactured wares from England. In this way our coastwise trade began.

The wave of New England immigration subsided and the tiny ships

Shares in the Mill and benefits thereof." One contributed the land and damsite: the others built the dam, the spillway, wheel, and mill cooperatively, and they chipped in to buy the grindstones. That mill was still in operation more than two centuries after it was built. It was the first of many water-driven mills



*The millpond at Dean's Mills, now the reservoir of the Mystic Water Company, was where James Dean, Jr., in 1696 built the first textile mill, carrying on the industrial dynasty founded 20 years before when his father came from Taunton to open Stonington's first blacksmith shop.*

from Stonington headed down the coast freighted with local products that the Middle and Southern colonists wanted; no livestock and little corn, but cedar shingles and oak staves for hogsheads to hold Virginia tobacco and barrels for the tar, rosin, and turpentine of the Carolinas.

Two years after our first town meeting, in 1660 we launched our first industrial enterprise. It was half-communistic experiment, half-corporate venture. Eight of our founding fathers "do bind ourselves each to the other in a bond of £20 to build a grist mill . . . each man to be at Equal Charges, either in good pay or work, & each man to have Equal

erected along all the streams that tumble down from our rocky heights to the coast.

Thus from the beginning Stoningtonians fortunately had three strings to their bow — farming, shipping, and manufacturing — and faith we needed in them for none of the three ever grew into "big business." Always they have been meshed together with interwoven interests.

The demand for wheat in the Southern colonies was the first big change in our farming and it was broadened when our coastwise trade reached out to the Caribbean. Till about 1725, wheat was our principal crop; but after that it met a fatal

competitor in wheat from Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Forced out of wheat, our farmers went in for cheese. At the eve of the Revolution, when Boston was besieged, Stonington not only passed a flowery resolution of sympathy, but sent money and a wagonload of cheese for the relief of the beleaguered inhabitants. During the war Stonington cheese was important in the army rations, and on March 26, 1777, Capt. Nathan Palmer commandeered 11,618 pounds, valued at £299 16s. 6d.

This cheese business was important and profitable until after the Civil War. Then it was trampled under the hooves of long-horned western cattle, driven over the romantic cowboy trails to be slaughtered and dressed by the rising packing industry and brought to our Eastern markets by the new-laid railways. Replaced by cheap meat as the standard protein item in American dietary, cheese became a sort of condiment, a topping for baked macaroni or a dessert nibbled with pie or black coffee.

### *Fruit and Vegetables*

So Stonington farmers grew more vegetables and extended their apple orchards. But our Northern Spys, Snows, Sheep's Nose, Winesaps, and Russets — what a tangy, juicy flavor there is even in the names of those old New England varieties! — have been replaced by bright red MacIntosh and monstrous big Delicious from New York State, the Shenandoah, and the Northwest. Now only broken rows of old apple trees, straggling across our pastures, are left, appropriate mementoes of a vanished agriculture. As for our garden peas and wax beans, our crook-neck squash and green corn — what seemed then to be the impregnable advantage of proximity to Boston and New York has been erased by fleets of trucks that bring us fresh strawberries in March and corn-on-the-cob in May.

Strawberries were once quite a specialty. They were picked by the children after school and rushed by express to be in the cities next morning. The New Deal Minimum Wage Law stopped all that. It is astonishing how many fewer boxes of berries an active lad can pick at 60¢ an hour compared with three boxes for a nickel. But in those days a nickel was good for a chocolate ice-cream soda at any drugstore.

### *Present-Day Farming*

Times change and time and again we have been compelled to change under pressure of competition or in response to shifting markets. Now the mainstays of our farms are turkeys, broilers, eggs, and milk. Our dairy farmers are up against a desperate labor problem. Who wants to work hard for long hours, seven days a week, with no social security, no paid holidays, no pension, no fringe benefits whatsoever? Our production of milk is therefore dwindling.

Our poultrymen are doing better. Over the hill from me lives the President of the New England Turkey Growers Association and a few miles beyond another descendant of our first settlers raises day-old chicks in quarter-million batches every week and ships them the country over filling orders for Sears Roebuck. We are in a section that raises 25 million broilers a year; the biggest broiler county in New England.

### *Profit or Loss*

All of which again verges dangerously on the Texas ideology, so let me add that of two of our broiler raisers, each with a production of some 25,000 birds a year, the one has just gone to Africa on a safari hunting big game; the other has gone to his bank hunting for a loan to pay his feed bill.

Like our farming, our maritime activities have had their ups and downs. The barter in beaver pelts



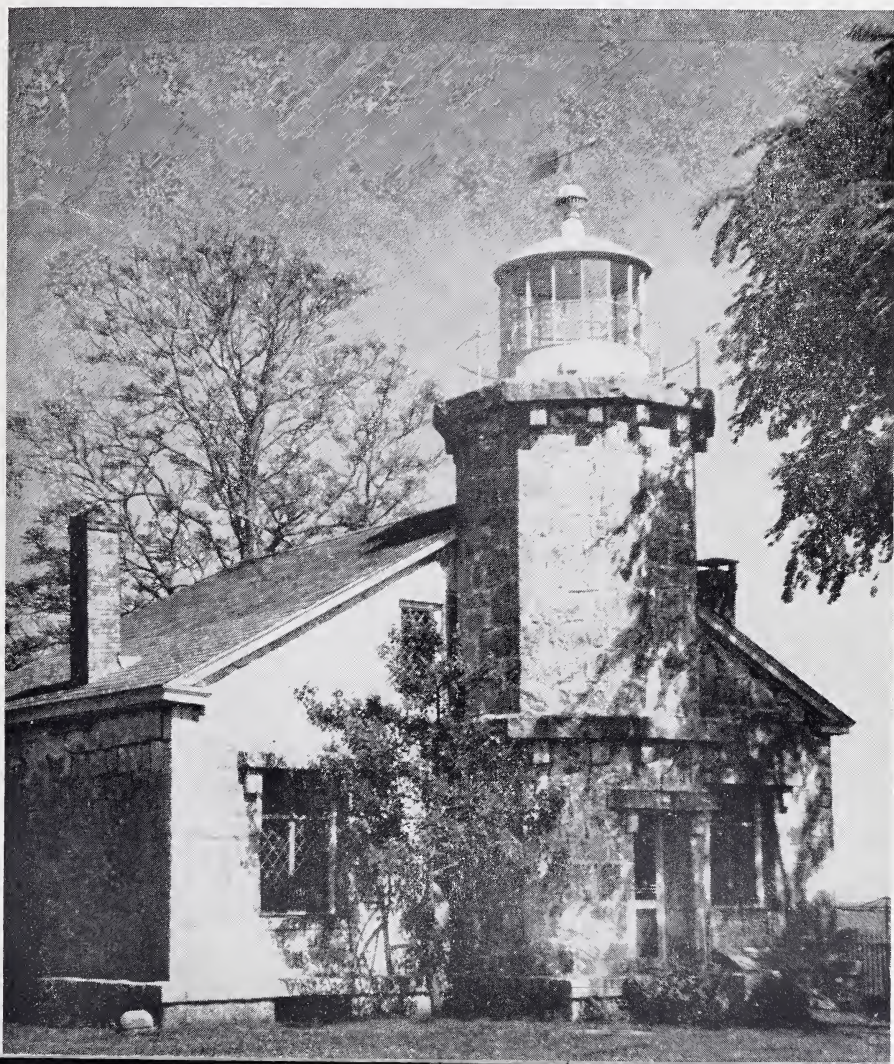
failing, our first settler, Thomas Stanton, and his boys entered the coastwise trade. From sailing little ships to building them was a logical step, and our first vessel was launched by the Rocks of the Pawcatuck in 1680 by Thomas Stanton, Jr. His brother, Daniel, went to Barbadoes to represent this pioneering family and died there in 1687, so Stonington must have been in the West Indian trade very early.

Many famous shipyards flourished on the Pawcatuck, in Stonington

Harbor, and especially at Mystic. That story has been often told and it points up the same economic moral. From Stanton's little pinnacle to the second atomic submarine just built, our local shipbuilders have faced constant change—sloops to square riggers to many-masted schooners; sail to steam; wooden hulls to iron; sidewheelers to screw propellers—and they have adapted themselves to each. The same was true of our shipmasters.

Many a tiny sloop and sturdy

*The Stonington Lighthouse built in 1840 replaced the first lighthouse built in Connecticut by the Federal Government and stone from the original tower was used in its walls. Here is housed the beautifully displayed collection of the Stonington Historical Society, which is open to the public.*







*A typical "dragger" of 40-odd fishing boats — the largest fleet in New England west of Gloucester, Massachusetts — which are today one of Stonington's largest industries. Manned mostly, and owned too, by Portuguese, many of whose families date back to the hey-days of sealing and whaling.*

whaler, swift clipper and lumbering sidewheeler, owned in Stonington and crewed with Stonington men, have sailed the Seven Seas in search of a profitable cargo. First it was salt fish, ice, and barrel staves exchanged in the West Indies for sugar, molasses, and rum, followed by the triangular trade with the Caribbean, the Azores, and Spain or Portugal. Later came the greater triangle to the Antarctic for seal skins to be traded in China for silks and spices and tea, and so back to the homeport.

The profitable sealing was followed by the more profitable whaling, which marked the high point of our

prosperity. But alas, the golden whale oil became scarce and high-priced, so when Col. Drake's crude drilling rig tapped the hidden resources of petroleum, it was quickly replaced as the universal illuminant of kerosene.

The sensational clipper ships plying 'round the Horn to China and California, were succeeded by the prosaic Sound steamers of the Stonington Line, which connected the first railway station in Connecticut, terminus of the line to Providence and Boston, with New York. Then nobody dreamed that the railroads could ever span such great rivers as the Connecticut, the Housatonic, and the Thames, and the Stonington Line flourished lustily till it met the competition of a stronger company with bigger, faster steamers, the famous Fall River Line.

Our seafaring tradition still burns brightly, and we have a fleet of some forty fishing ships to say nothing of little oyster boats, mostly manned, captained, and owned too, by our Portuguese citizens who came to us back in the whaling days. Again we are facing our familiar dilemma: the cod and swordfish, the haddock, mackerel, and bluefish in our waters are gravely depleted. Already some of our fishermen have sailed down to the Gulf Coast, not holidaying, but shrimp fishing: and Stonington has been torn whether or not to build a factory where trashfish, the inedible kinds, can be transformed into oil and cattle feed and fertilizer.

Continual readjustment has also dominated our industrial activities. It began with our first industry, the gristmill. Its original communal management proved so ineffectual that, after some squabbling, it was turned over to a private partnership of the miller and the owner of the millpond.

Next to a gristmill and a saw mill, a smithery was a prime necessity to the first colonists, and the town struck a bargain in 1676 with James

Dean of Taunton in Plymouth Colony. It was a new industries deal since adopted by thousands of local Chambers of Commerce. Dean agreed "to do the town's iron work for and during the full term of three years." In return he received two 24-acre lots and £32 6s., payable in "pork, butter, or wheat," subscribed by nineteen townsmen. Three of the younger men agreed to cut the thatch for his house: Amos Richardson undertook to cart the thatch; Thomas Wheeler promised 200 lathes; Lt. John Mason, Jr., and Gershom Palmer offered each a day's work on his house. The blacksmith "promiseth to repay all such persons in smithery work . . . but that for the future each person shall pay honestly for what work they have done."

### *To Son and Grandson*

Dean founded quite an industrial dynasty. His son, James, Jr., dammed the brook a couple of miles upstream and installed a sawmill and a fulling mill. Here, at what we still call Dean's Mills, though the pond has become the town's reservoir, his son, James, III, built our first factory building, adding a gristmill and establishing a textile mill. This third James Dean sold out in 1830: his successor leased the property piece-meal to half a dozen enterprising individuals.

With atomic power in the offing, we forget that our streams supplied most of the power to our Connecticut industries till the 1880's. Several years ago, an elder Stoningtonian guided me along the little stream that runs down to Stony Brook which empties into Stonington Harbor. In that dozen twisting miles he located fourteen old damsites and identified most of them with their owners and goods they made. There was flour and sawn lumber, of course, but also nails and woolen blankets, tinware — cans and pans — and wooden bob-

bins for textile mills and spools for housewives.

In Stonington village the first factory building, a stout, square granite structure, was built before the Civil War and its successive tenants epitomize our industrial past. First, it was leased to two enterprisers, a manufacturer of horseshoe nails and a firm which made cheap jewelry sold to ship captains to be bartered with the South Sea Islanders for copra. During the Civil War it was taken over by the Joslyn Firearms Company which produced carbines for the Union cavalry: a war baby plainly, for in 1866 the building was purchased by the Standard Braid Company and later by the Atwood Machine Company, makers of textile machinery. Since that famous firm merged with a distinguished competitor, our "old stone factory" has become the home of the Plax plastic bottles.

From horseshoe nails to squeeze bottles: Stonington's industrial history in a nutshell. Today we make twoscore of different kinds of goods from marine engines and printing presses to cardboard mailing tubes and little twisted bands of lead for flower holders.

### *Change, Constant Change*

So from livestock and barrel staves down three centuries to luscious velvets and handy paper staplers (two of our famous products) we and our fathers and their fathers have wrested a good living from our rather inhospitable environment. Few of us have won great wealth, but our town records do not record a single death by starvation. Today, in a world where four out of five of mankind must labor from daylight to dusk, most of them chronically underfed, we live comparatively like princes; far better, indeed, than did the Princes of the House of Pharaoh; better even than the Bourbon or the Tudor kings.

We have accomplished this economic miracle not because of our salubrious climate or our wealth of natural resources; not because we Stoningtonians are miracle workers; but fundamentally because we have supplemented our muscles and those of our horses and oxen, with mechanical power. First it was the power of falling water, then of coal, of gasoline and fuel oil, and soon, no doubt, the stupendous power locked in the atom.

But man cannot live by power alone.

In harnessing power we have hitched it to our American system of mass production: more and more goods, made at less and less cost, sold at ever-lowering prices to more and more customers!

We make this system work because the American market is wide open, free, highly competitive; a market over which customer rules like a despot. He, or more often she, is at once the inspiration of our business enterprise and the final arbiter

of its success or failure.

We have made this American system work because always we had been free to adapt our activities to the changing supply and demand of the marketplace. Our forefathers changed their customers from Puritan immigrants to West Indian planters; to the carefree natives of the South Seas and the shrewd Chinese; to the reckless Forty-niners of the California gold rush. We have produced successively corn and wheat, cheese, apples, vegetables, and now milk and poultry, all in response to competitive pressures. We have manufactured almost every sort of goods from toilet soap to textile looms — whatever through the changing years our customers have demanded.

So long as we are free to engage in any enterprise, to grasp any opportunity to fill the wants of any customer anywhere, we do not doubt that we shall be able somehow to scramble a good living.

*The Old Stone Factory where successively horseshoe nails and cheap jewelry for the South Seas trade, carbines for the Union Cavalry, braid, textile machinery, and now Plax plastic squeeze bottles have been made. This historic industrial building epitomizes the constantly changing ways Stonington has successfully responded to changing demands from changing buyers the world over.*







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